

In her 89th year, devout and disciplined Bayview super-volunteer keeps on serving her community

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Beverly Ann Johnson Taylor, or Miss Taylor as sheâ??s known to the many organizations for whom she volunteers, celebrates her 89th birthday this August. For 40 years, she has taught in the public schools, deriving both personal satisfaction and numerous accolades for her service. Retirement only opened new opportunities to serve her church and community.

â??She works nonstop; she never says no to a request for help,â?• said Chester Williams, who works with Taylor organizing seniors in the Bayview for the San Francisco Community Living Campaignâ??s Community Connectors program. â??Commitment to the community describes her; sheâ??s always available to help the betterment of seniors within the community. Beverly has been on a number of committees for years.â?•

The Network for Elders was one of the first of many organizations that came to rely on her commitment and energy. After Taylor introduced herself to Shireen McSpadden, a social worker with the Network and now director of the San Francisco Department of Disability and Aging Services, McSpadden asked her to volunteer and put her on the board. Taylor has served as the Networkâ??s coordinator ever since â?? leading, mentoring and supporting its members.

Her Network meetings are â??just plain funâ??

â??Beverly has been a leader and advocate for older women in her community. Her monthly Network meetings bring knowledge on health issues, support around available resources, and just plain fun and social opportunities through the quarterly pot-luck birthday parties,â?• said Melanie Grossman, a former social worker and Network member. â??Beverly also reaches out with telephone calls and cards in the name of the Network to anyone who is sick or has suffered a loss in the family.â?•



In her earlier retirement years, when she was more agile, Taylor helped Rebuild Together, â??painting houses, doing repairs, cleaning houses and yards. Oh, so many yards.â?• For decades, she has coordinated the food pantry at her church, St. Paul Tabernacle Baptist.

Sheâ??s also on the board of the San Francisco Faith-Based Coalition, a group of 35 churches from the Bayview and Western Addition; makes phone calls for the Community Living Campaignâ??s grocery delivery program in the Bayview, and serves on the board of the Advisory Council for the Commission on Aging.

â??My number one concern is that the needs of seniors arenâ??t being met. The biggest issue is food.â?• But there are other needs, too, such as the unreliability of paratransit. â??Iâ??m tired of waiting over four hours for paratransit.â?•



Beverly Taylor opens the Transportation Fair in August 2017 at the Southeast Campus of City College in Bayview Hunters Point. (Photo by Judy Goddess.)

In recent years, Taylorâ??s diabetes has made it difficult for her to get around. Now with the pandemic, she is homebound. But she can still make calls â?? about 125 a week â?? send get-well and condolence cards to church members, and attend meetings on Zoom. And, she added, â??I never liked shopping anyway, so I definitely donâ??t miss that.â?•

Taylor, who describes herself as â??a Christian woman, a child of the King,â?• was born in Algiers, LA., across the river from New Orleans. Her father was a Baptist pastor, her mother, a missionary.

An offer she chose to refuse

Her first visit to San Francisco was in 1954 to attend a banquet for her older brother, a principal in the San Francisco Unified School District and coach of the high school football team, state champions that year. There, she met the superintendent of San Francisco schools who, learning she was a teacher, asked if sheâ??d consider moving to San Francisco. â??We need good teachers,â?• he told her.

Taylor declined. She had been warned by her brother that discipline was sorely lacking in the California schools. â??I told him I didnâ??t have a California teaching certificate and that California schools, unlike Louisiana schools, donâ??t discipline students.â?• In a move to support school staff, the local police department gifted every Louisiana teacher with a gas pencil gun for maintaining discipline. Plus many, like Taylor, believed in â??spare the rod, spoil the child.â?•

Besides, her life was full. â??I was teaching English and reading in a junior high school in the Jefferson Parish schools (a district in New Orleans), coordinating the girlsâ?? drill team for Mardi Gras and attending Southern University for my masterâ??s degree in education. I wasnâ??t ready to make the move.â?•

But schools were changing, even in Louisiana. The unanimous 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education paved the way for school desegregation and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. By the late 1960s, after considerable court fights, the Louisiana schools were forced to desegregate. Up until then, Black students could only attend Black schools, and Black teachers were only assigned to Black schools.

After successfully teaching in both junior high and high schools for 20 years, southern schools were ordered to integrate their teaching staff. â??The system was suddenly going crazy,â?• Taylor said**.** After being assigned a desk job â??doing nothing,â?• Taylor and several other Black teachers were placed in an affluent, predominantly White school. The White staff was not welcoming of their new Black colleagues, she said. Walking by the teacherâ??s lounge, she saw one of them throw her lunch in the garbage can.â??I waited till the end of the semester, took a sabbatical and leftâ?• â?? the school and Louisiana.

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A fellowship from San Francisco State University to complete her masterâ??s degree eased the move across country, though her first earthquake almost sent her back home.

â??Ghettoâ?? manner calms chaotic classroom

When money for her fellowship was about to run out, Taylor started looking for a teaching position. When a long-term sub (substitute) position became available in the Redwood City schools, Taylor took it. The experience only bore out her brotherâ??s warning.

â??The principal brought me to the classroom. The students were running around while the sub sat there with his legs crossed, reading the paper. The students wouldnâ??t even sit down when the principal shouted for order. One little boy left through the window. The principal walked out. He closed the door and left me there.â?•

Taylor realized the students had never experienced a disciplinarian, so she put on her best â??ghettoâ?• manner and educated them. â??Now everybody sit down,â?• she commanded. Then she slammed her briefcase on the desk with such force that â??it sounded like a gunshot.â?? â??You walk in this room like you have some sense.

â??From that day forward, I never had a problem.â?•

While the principal and students begged her to stay, the next year found her at Elmhurst Junior High in Oakland. She was weary of the commute on public transportation from her home to the Peninsula.

In Oakland, she came into her own and began trying new ways to engage students. â??I used the newspaper, the Oakland Tribune, to teach reading. I assigned the sports section to students who liked sports, the business section to math students. They loved it.â?• She had them read the paper and circle grammatical errors.

â??The students enjoyed the challenge and it was exciting to them to find so many errors. My principal was excited, too. We called the Oakland Tribune and asked if we could come over with the circled pages. The reporters were unbelievably excited: Someone was paying attention to what they wrote.â?•

Neither fatigue nor pain has stopped her

Taylor followed up by applying for a $50,000 grant from the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, with which she opened the first reading lab in the school district and the first late-afternoon teaching lab at the Oakland Tribune. In 1991, 20 years after she started teaching in Oakland, Taylor retired.

Asked about discipline in California schools, Taylor admits it was easier than she anticipated. She never missed the pencil gas gun and only once did she use the paddle on an Oakland student. â??A little boy kept acting up, playing the clown.â?• Years later, when he made the honor roll, his mother thanked Taylor for helping her son settle down to learning. â??She was very grateful.â?•

But teaching and serving her community were not Taylorâ??s only pleasures. Forty-six years ago, after moving to San Francisco, she married the love of her life. They met at Southern University where he was a lifeguard. Now a widow, Taylor looks back at their marriage as the â??happiest years of my life. He called me â??the Queenâ??. We went everywhere together.â?•

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But his death in 2014 didnâ??t stop her from going everywhere, although now she traveled alone. And today, though sheâ??s tired and ulcers on her legs make it difficult to walk, while thereâ??s still work to do, sheâ??ll do it. â??The Lord is trying to get our attention. We need to serve Him. We need to help San Francisco come together.â?•

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1. All Posts

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